The United States
Army Field Band

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Guidelines for the Oboe

by
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Guidelines for the Oboe

by
Master Sergeant Cynthia Barnes

The oboe is one of the world's most ancient instruments. Its expressive, soloistic quality has been recognized and utilized by composers of every era so its repertoire is extensive. A good oboist can contribute positively to virtually every musical setting.

THE INSTRUMENT

The first major challenge facing the oboist is to acquire both an instrument and a reed that are good enough to get the job done. Perhaps more than for any other instrument, this can be a frustrating and expensive task.

The selection of a new or used oboe should be done with much care and considerable input from well-informed sources, such as good professional players. Even the lowest priced student models cost several thousand dollars.

It is best to avoid old wood oboes. For most school settings, plastic is a much better option than wood. Not only is plastic less likely to crack, but it also will not change with age. Wood oboes are always vulnerable to cracking and, after several years of playing, may warp due to water absorption. Longevity and durability make plastic a wise choice.

If possible, purchase an instrument that has all the standard keys. The playing range of the oboe is already limited to about two-and-one-half octaves. To ensure that the entire range of the oboe is available, check for a low Bb key.

Proper maintenance of the oboe is crucial. Assemble the instrument carefully to avoid bending the rods or hitting the side keys against the connecting rods. Swab the instrument out after every playing session. Keep the instrument lightly oiled and free of dust.

General adjustments should be done by a qualified repairman at least once a year. Even the most careful treatment will not prevent the oboe from going out of adjustment. Frequently check the top and bottom joints for leaks. This can be done by covering the holes of the joint with the fingers and the bottom with the palm of the other hand. Suck the air from the joint; if there are no leaks, a vacuum will be created. An instrument that does leak will be difficult to play.

THE REED

The next major problem is to locate a source for good reeds. Unfortunately, there is just no simple, inexpensive answer to the question, "Where can I get a good reed?" Both good and bad reeds are expensive and have very short life expectancies. Alternating reeds daily will more than double their playing time. This gives the fibers of the cane a chance to recover.

Oboists who cannot make simple adjustments to their reeds are greatly handicapped. This requires the purchase of a block, plaque, and reed knife, along with some coaching from a knowledgeable professional. Learning to make reeds is a necessity for all serious players, but this is also costly and time consuming. A good oboe reed will crow a "C" in octaves. It does not crow in a wild, raucous fashion. This can be a sign of instability.

THE EMBOUCHURE

The oboist should not use a smiling embouchure. The lips must cover the teeth. The corners of the mouth should be drawn in and around the tip of the reed and act as a cushion. This helps to keep the tip open. Avoid biting. Do not put too much reed in the mouth. Always think, "back on the tip."

HAND POSITION

Proper hand position can be achieved by maintaining a straight line from the knuckles to the elbow. The fingers must remain curved over the keys and close. Avoid tension in the hands and fingers; physical tension in any part of the body is detrimental to good oboe playing.

PRACTICE

Since the oboe is most noted for its beautiful sound, it is important to learn what a good sound is and how to produce one. Long tones and drives

(see Example 1 below) are very important for developing tone and control.

Start the attack as quietly as possible. The attack must be absolutely clean. Do not proceed until the first attack is perfect. Keep the stream of air constant and well supported. Interrupt the stream of air with a clean legato tongue.

After the first perfect soft attack, gradually crescendo with each subsequent legato tongue. At the peak on count five, hold the note no louder than ***mf***. Make a slight break, then reattack in the same precise manner, this time getting gradually softer (count six, seven, eight, nine). On count nine, hold the note as softly as possible for several beats. At the very end make a slight "touch" with the tongue to stop the tone. This exercise should be done slowly. Drives are much more difficult than they appear on paper. Done correctly, they help develop control over attacks, pitch, volume, and tone quality. Begin every practice session with a few drives, starting with "A 440." Every other note that causes difficulty will benefit from the practicing of drives.

Scales should also be a part of every practice session. Play a different scale every week. Go through all thirteen major keys, as well as all three forms of every minor key. Practice the scales with a metronome. Do not increase the tempo until the scale can be performed perfectly, cleanly, and accurately. Vary the articulations, using the examples given *(see Example 2 on next page and Scale Supplement)*.

Play each scale two octaves, or as close to two octaves as the oboe's range will allow. Do not repeat the top note, but continue in a smooth pattern back down the scale without a break. Gradually increase the tempo, but never practice any exercise in a sloppy, uncontrolled manner *(see Example 3 on next page)*.

Another unique feature of oboe playing involves eliminating the extra air accumulated while playing. In order to avoid the dizziness that may result from the back pressure of this excess air, it is necessary to quickly "puff" out some of the air before breathing in a new supply for the next entrance.

INTONATION

The oboist is often assigned the task of tuning the band, orchestra, or chamber ensemble. The richness of overtones in the oboe's sound makes it an easy tone with which to tune. Therefore, conscientious players should make certain that both their instruments and reeds are stable. The reed should never be pushed in or pulled out to make the pitch flatter or sharper.

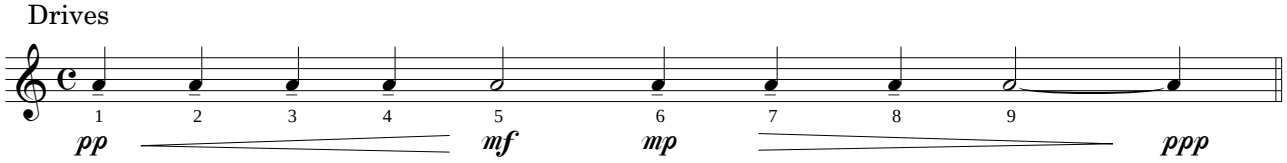
There are many electronic devices available to help tune a musical ensemble consistently. These tools are also helpful during reed making and individual practice sessions. Advanced players should consider purchasing one for their own use.

SUMMARY

The young oboist faces many difficulties. The selection and care of the oboe, the difficulty of keeping it in good repair, and the lack of consistent reed sources set a unique challenge for the beginning and advancing oboist. The need for private instruction for oboe students cannot be overstated.

The expense of playing the oboe can be often offset by the opportunities good players have for obtaining college scholarships. Many universities seeking competent oboists to play in their wind ensembles and orchestras will even offer financial assistance to non-music majors. The opportunity to defray the ever increasing costs of a college education can make it worth the extra money spent on lessons and equipment.

Example 1



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Method Books

A Complete Method for the Oboe ..... A. M. R. Barrett
48 Famous Studies ..... W. Ferling

Excerpt Books

Vade Mecum of the Oboist ..... A. Andraud

Professional Association

International Double Reed Society (IDRS) ..... An association for players and teachers of oboe, English horn, and bassoon; annual dues for student members is $30

Suppliers

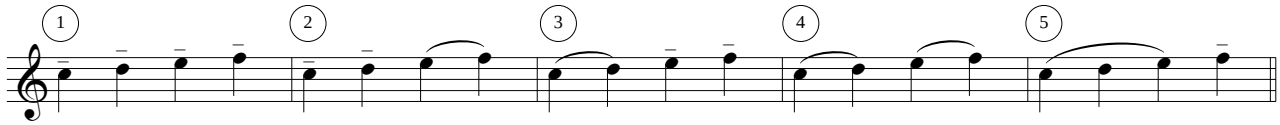
An extensive list of suppliers of oboes and oboe equipment is available from the U.S. Army Field Band

Instructional Videotape

Understanding the Oboe is an educational video produced by the U.S. Army Field Band and offered free of charge to music educators

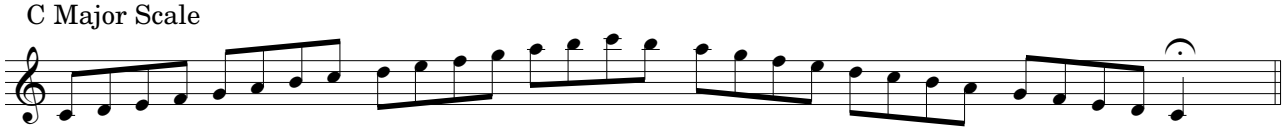
Example 2

Scale Articulations



Example 3

C Major Scale

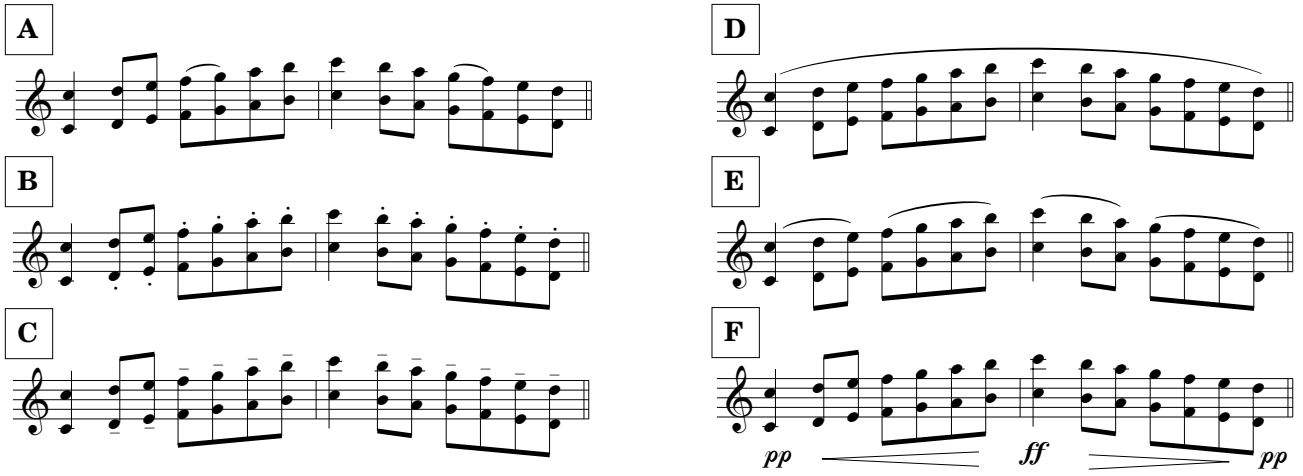


Scale Supplement

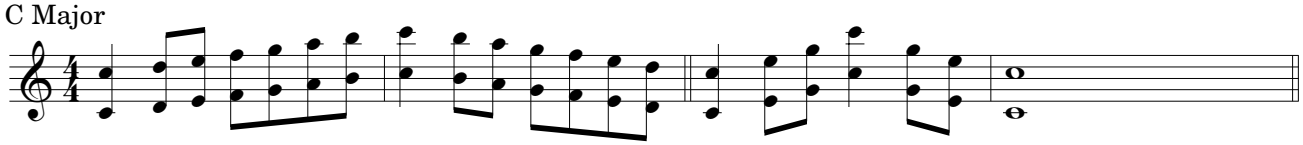
The fifteen major and minor scales make up our musical "ABCs." Just as a person wishing to read learns the alphabet first, a musician cannot expect to master an instrument without first learning the basic set of scales. By diligently practicing the major scales and all three forms of the minor scales, they will become automatic, just like reading the alphabet. This will make playing, especially sight reading, much easier so that the musician can concentrate towards the ultimate goal—making music!

Each scale below should be played slowly at first, ensuring that each note is played correctly. Gradually work for speed, but do not rush. Use a metronome whenever possible to guarantee evenness and a steady tempo. The player should practice difficult scales twice as often as easy ones to develop competence in all keys. As skills increase, change rhythmic patterns and increase tempos. Advanced players can still use scales to work on intonation, technique, range, and dynamics.

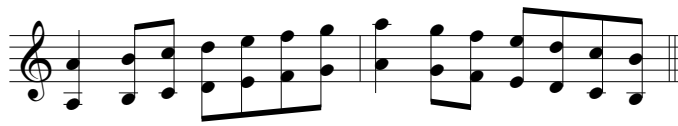
Use the following patterns one at a time or in combination to get even more benefit from scale practice:



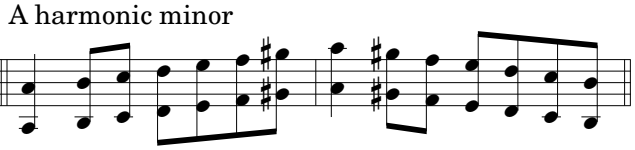
C Major



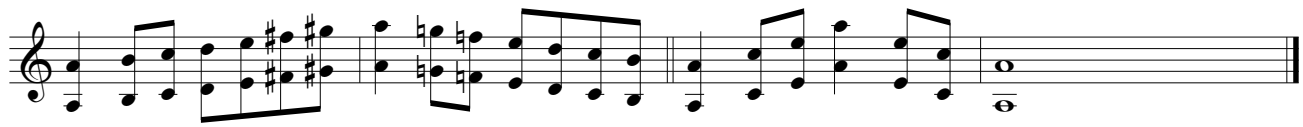
A natural minor



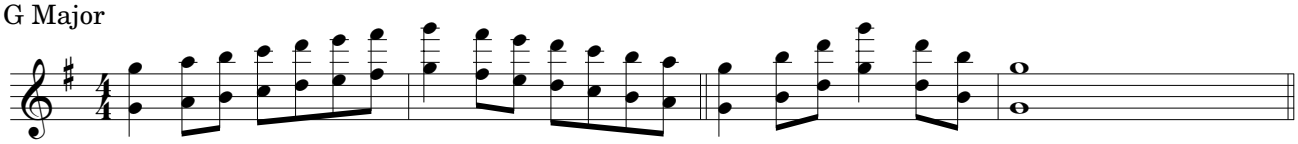
A harmonic minor



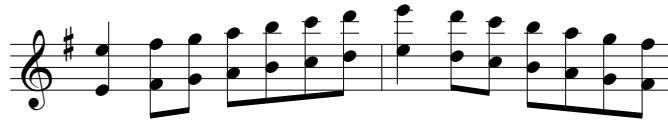
A melodic minor



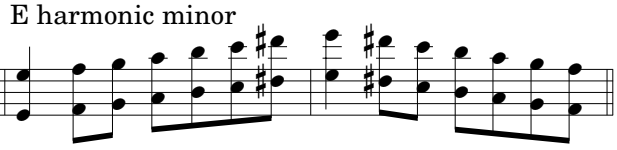
G Major



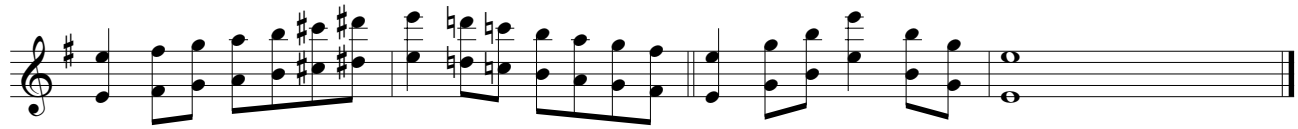
E natural minor



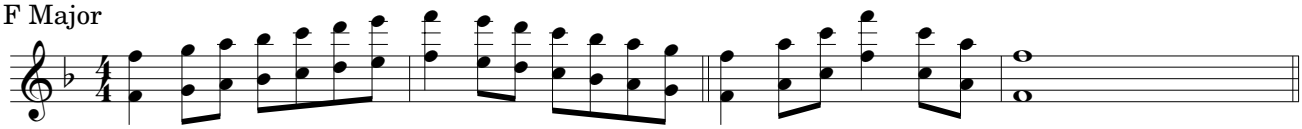
E harmonic minor



E melodic minor



F Major



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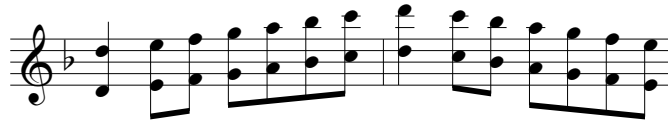

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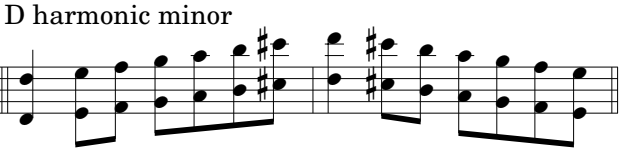

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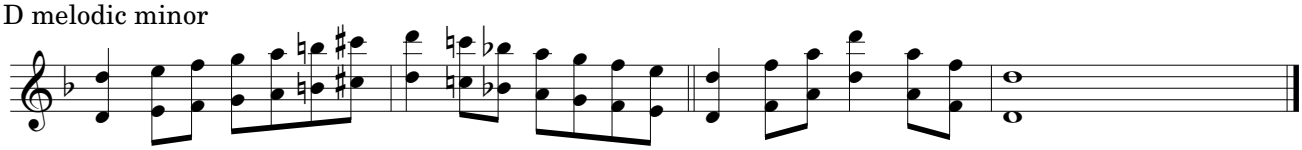
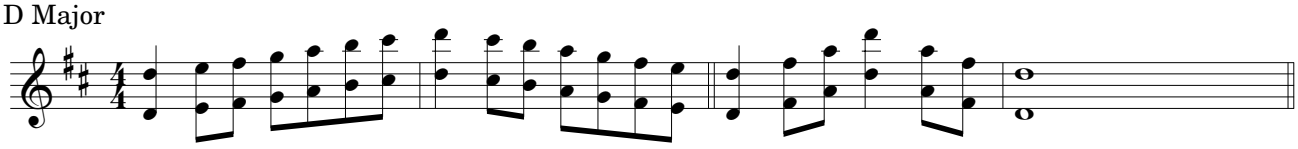
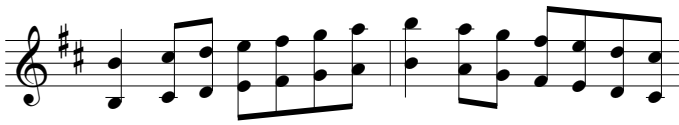


D Major



B natural minor



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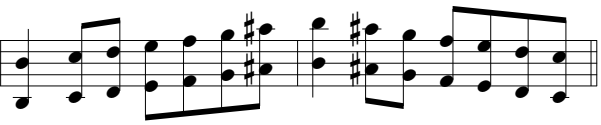

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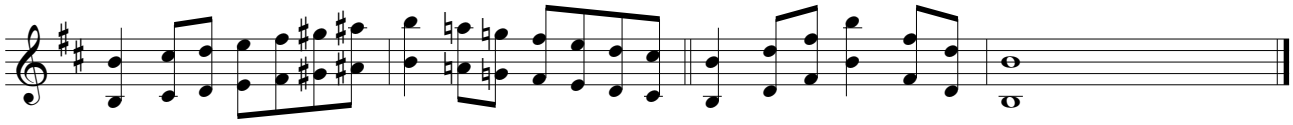
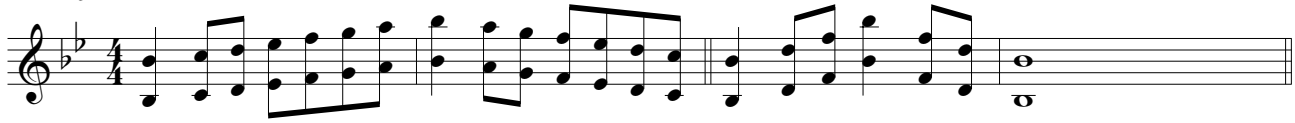


Bb Major



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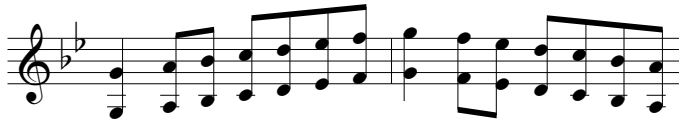

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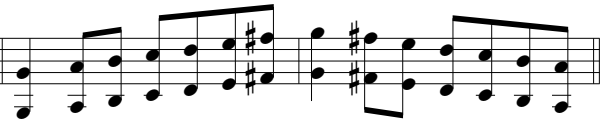

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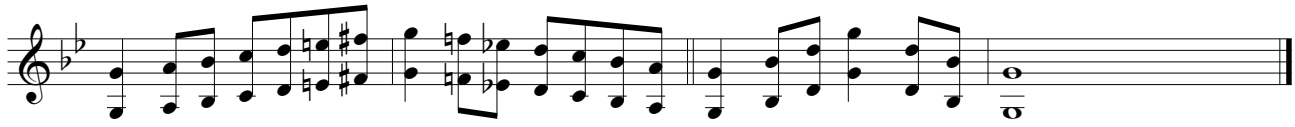
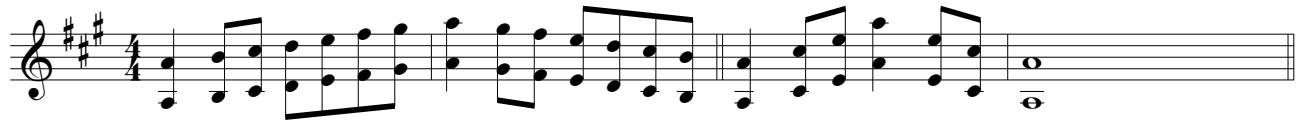


A Major



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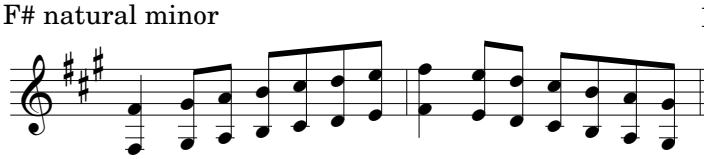

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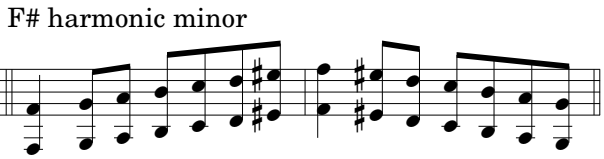

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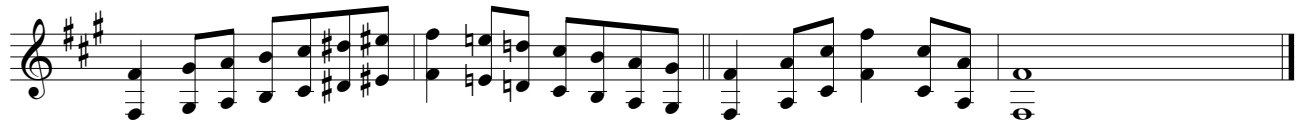
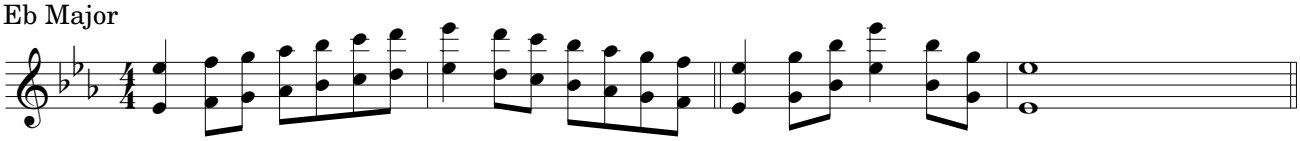


Eb Major



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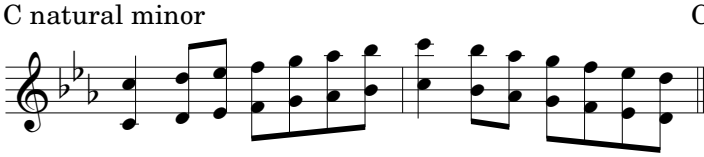

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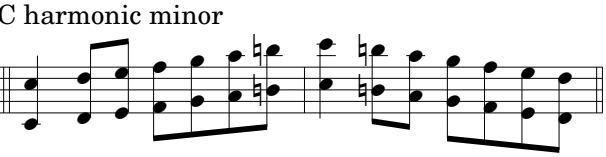

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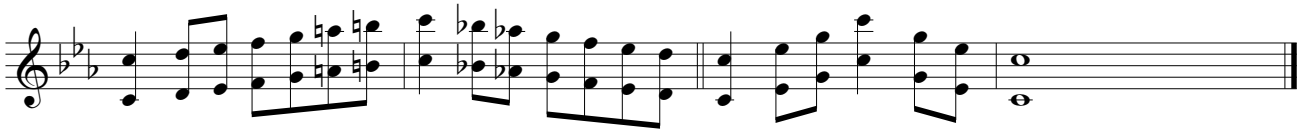

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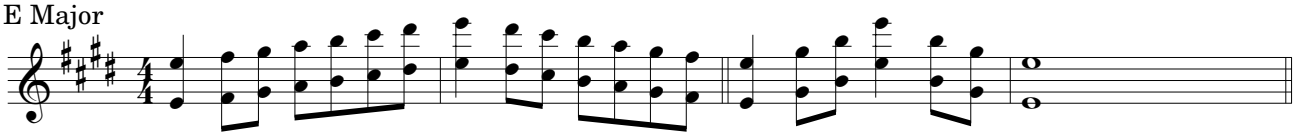

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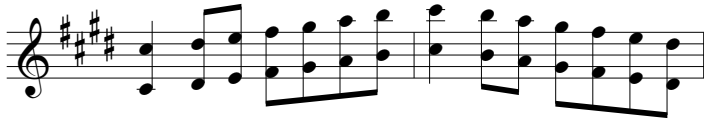

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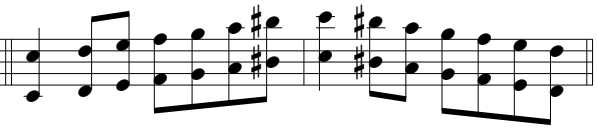

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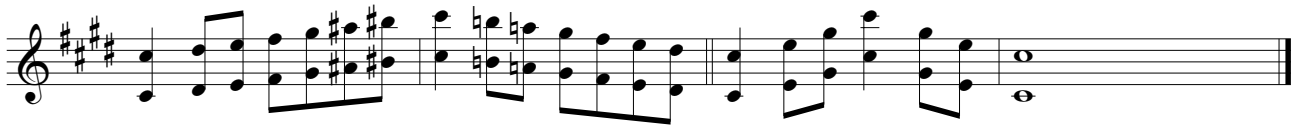
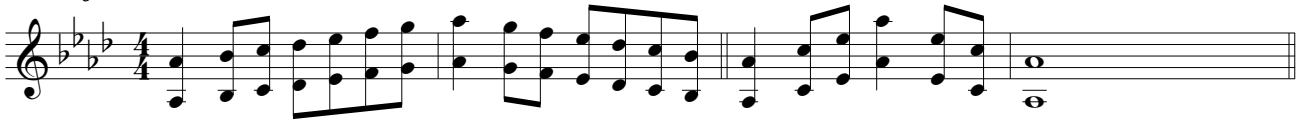


Ab Major



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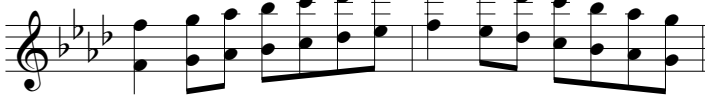

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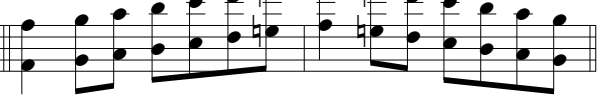

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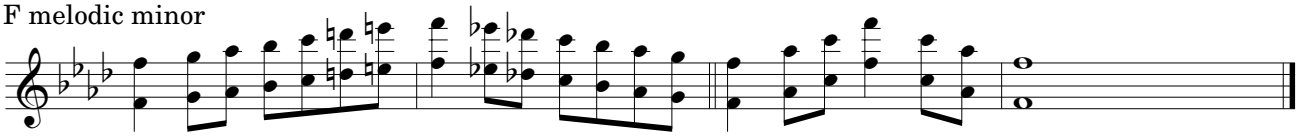
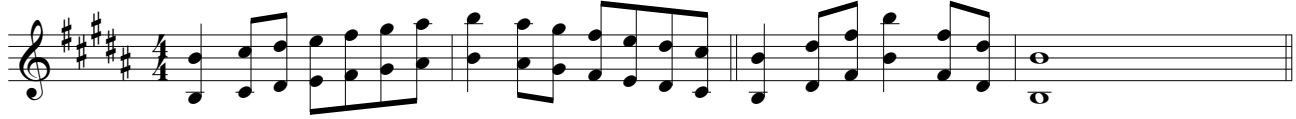
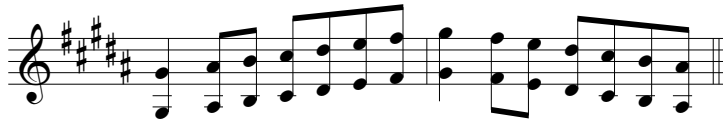


B Major



G# natural minor



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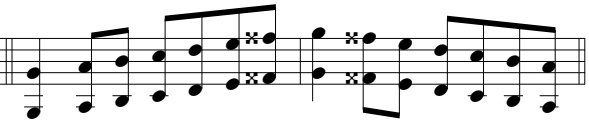

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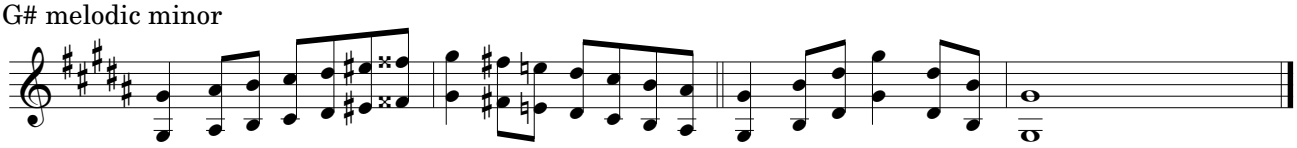
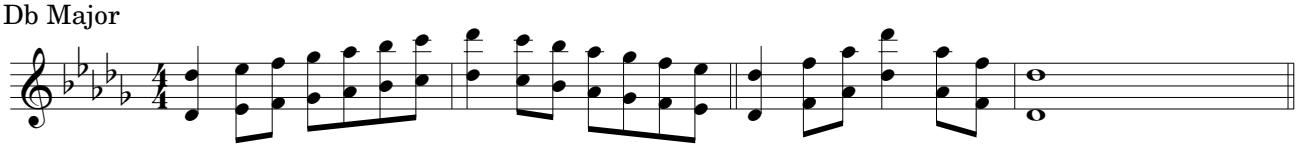
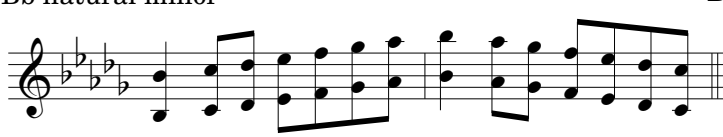


Db Major



Bb natural minor



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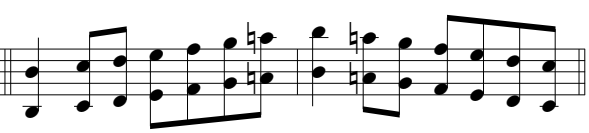

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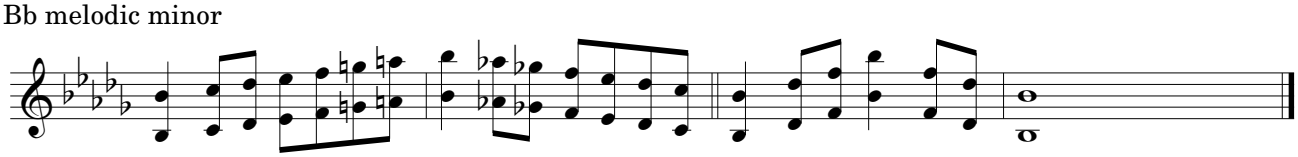
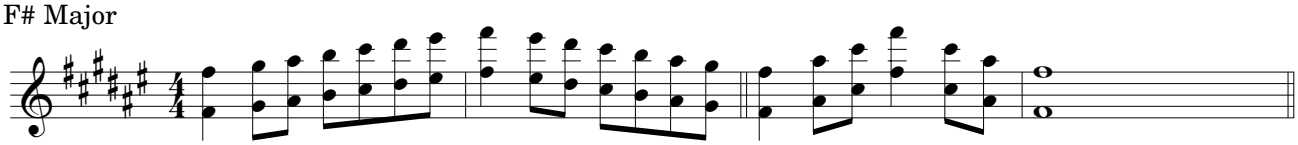
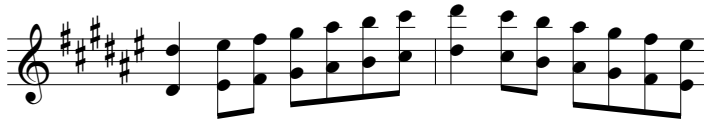


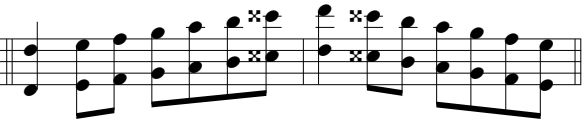
F# Major



D# natural minor



D# harmonic minor



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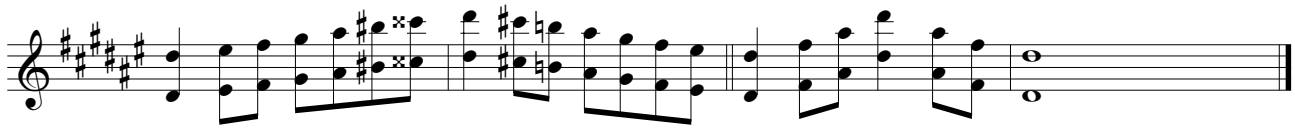
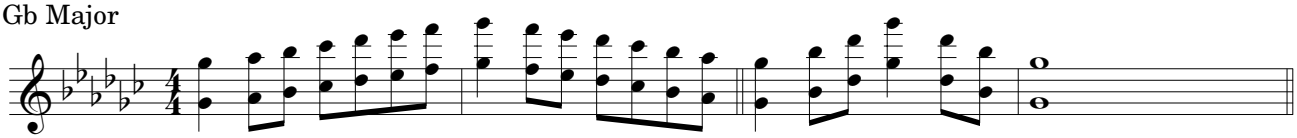
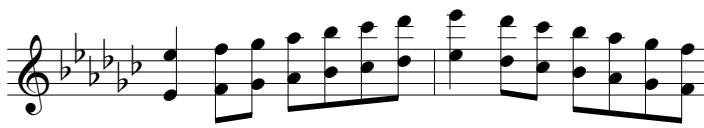


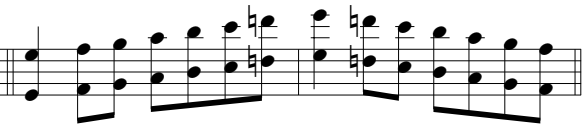
Gb Major



Eb natural minor



Eb harmonic minor



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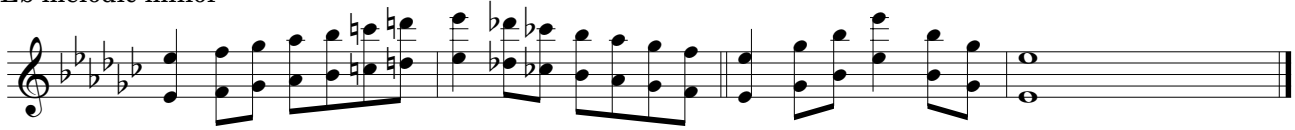
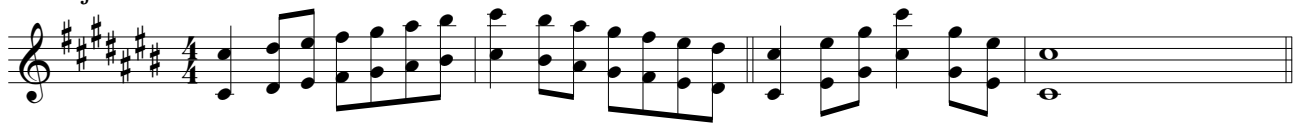
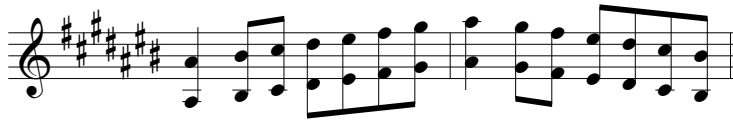


C# Major



A# natural minor



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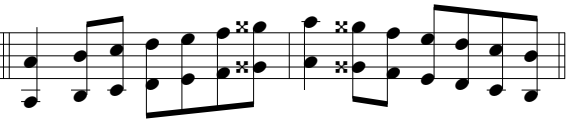

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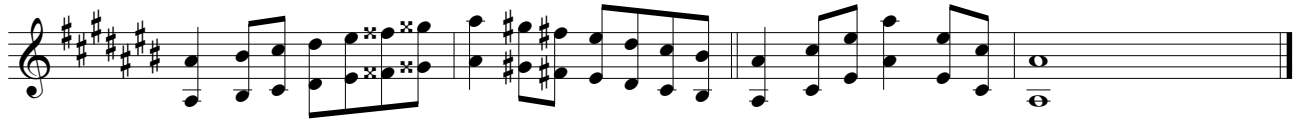

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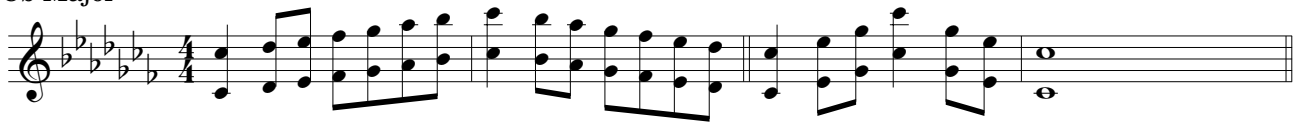
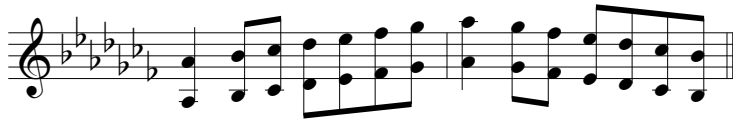
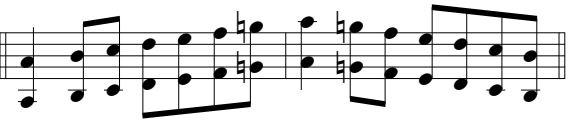
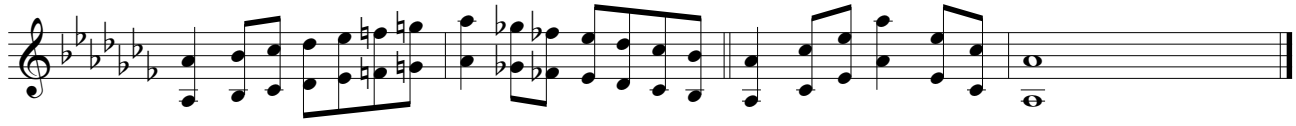


Ab natural minor



Ab harmonic minor



Ab melodic minor